

Questions About Man

Finding Our Place in the World

David Gooding

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Man's Relationship to This World

Are We Irresponsible Accidents, or Responsible Creatures?

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your kind words of welcome. It is a great pleasure for me to come over from Queen's University to address such a select and illustrious company.

I want to put my cards on the table at once and explain the attitude and vantage point from which I propose to enter these lectures. I speak as a confirmed Christian, albeit I shall be as fair as I can to the views of those with whom I cannot agree. Nevertheless, let me point out that the questions we shall be discussing are such that all must ask, sooner or later, whether they are Christians or not.

For instance, in this first lecture we shall discuss whether man¹ is an irresponsible accident, or a responsible creature. Whether we are Christians or not, or if we ever become Christians or not, it is a matter of exceedingly important social significance to decide whether man is an irresponsible accident, or a responsible creature who can be called into account for his actions.

In the second lecture next week, we shall ask whether this world is ours by permanent freehold or expiring lease. Is there any way of knowing whether our earth is likely to continue uninterruptedly and indefinitely, or may we expect it to blow up or freeze us all out of existence one of these days? Presumably this too is a matter of some interest, even if we are not Christians nor remotely interested in religion at all.

I come at these things as a Christian and shall devote a considerable amount of time to deal with arguments that have been brought against the Christian viewpoint, which many people nowadays feel have somehow triumphed conclusively. My general attempt will be to show that these arguments are not anywhere near so conclusive or weighty as they might at first seem. If I spend too much time on that, and fail to spend time positively proving that Christianity is correct, then I must plead shortage of time. I'm quite aware that to disprove arguments against Christianity is not necessarily to prove that Christianity is true, but if you wish me to do more I can only suggest that you invite me back again to give another series of lectures devoted purely and simply to the positive side of proving that Christianity is true.

The question that I have set for our consideration this evening is 'Are we irresponsible accidents or responsible creatures?', and it is really two questions.

¹ Where the term 'man' is used, it refers to both men and women.

1. Is man an irresponsible accident?

Let us put the option to ourselves. Was our origin like this? One day in the remote past, by some accident, the atomic parts of this material universe suddenly swerved and met together. Some of them stuck together; then, coming adrift again, they reformed their combinations until at last shapes were formed, and then creatures. Was it all a complete accident without any forethought or plan, and therefore without any significance? Is our existence, with all its implications, to be accounted for like that? Above all, if it came by accident without any forethought and plan, might it be ended equally capriciously without any thought or plan?

That view was seriously put forward in ancient times. Empedocles, Lucretius, and many of the Epicurean philosophers held a view of life that was substantially that. Human life, together with the rest of the universe, found its origin in an accidental swerve of the component atoms, without forethought and certainly without direction from any god. And when those atoms come adrift again by sheer accident, that will be the end of it all.

If that's how life came about, I don't propose to enlarge on the implications for the meaninglessness of life, or the sheer mockery of that sense of purpose that we all have within us. I pass to the alternative that I have put: *Is life an accident, or a thing created thoughtfully, purposefully, and therefore meaningfully, by God the absolute creator?* The deepest meaning of life is that it is related to and exists for its creator, and being eternal he gives to life eternal significance. That then is the one question: Is man an irresponsible accident?

2. Is man a responsible creature?

By 'responsible' I mean, do men and women have a real choice, a real power to choose between this and that action, a very real will that can determine how to act, and a deliberate sense of purpose for the future? When it is all over, is it fair, then, that they are brought to account for their actions and either praised or blamed for doing what they have done? Are they free agents, and therefore responsible for their choices and all that has followed?

Is man's sense of being responsible only an illusion? Is it merely the effect of a chance coming together of the chemical constituents of his body and brain, over which he has no real control at all? He makes his choice to buy an orange instead of an apple, to marry this woman or that woman, to start a business or to close it, simply because certain chemical constituents came together by chance in his body and brain, without his control and beyond his power to alter them?

If we can answer the second question, we shall have gone a long way to answering the first one. If I am a responsible being, then it would be impossible for me to think that I came about by accident. If irresponsible, then theoretically it could be that I came about by an accident. Perhaps I was made by a creator, but he made me like a piece of mechanism, without a will, with no choice but to do what he made me do. A motorcar is something like that. In spite of all your experiences on cold mornings when it won't start and you want it to start, or when it won't stop and you want it stop, it is really an irresponsible thing. You have no business kicking it if it won't start. There's no point blaming the car, and I assure you that it will take no notice of you anyway. Theoretically, then, could man be an irresponsible creature of God?

If he is a responsible being, I think we shall agree that it would be impossible to imagine a responsible being as the result of an accident. To whom would he be responsible? If his very choice was an accident, who will hold him responsible? Let alone the underlying consideration: how can deliberate purpose and responsibility emerge out of nowhere? Will it emerge from a substratum that is completely accidental, devoid of thought and responsibility itself?

Everyone is biased and we all act on the supposition that we are responsible people

I'd like next to make the point that when we come to consider this matter seriously, most of us find ourselves in a dilemma. On the one hand, we like to conceive of ourselves as responsible beings, and yet there are moments when most of us wish we were not. I ought to elaborate on that, because these considerations will play a considerable part in the decision we come to. We must face the fact that we all have biases in one direction or another for which we must make due allowance, lest we are deceived by our bias into wishful thinking and imagine it is the result of logic.

I have a bias. I have already told you that I'm speaking as a Christian. I'm going to submit that we all have a bias. One day it's in the direction of thinking that we are responsible creatures, and on other occasions it's a very strong wish not to be. Most days we do behave on the unconscious supposition that we are responsible, and most of us give that impression and run our business on that presupposition.

What would you think of a Prime Minister who got in by making certain promises, and in two years' time had completely failed to fulfil those promises and instead had done something completely different? You would ask why he had not fulfilled those promises. What would you think, then, if he turned round and said, 'But I'm not to blame for that. The promise I made was merely by chance. It was whatever way round the chemicals came into my brain on the morning that I made the promise. Since then they have changed themselves; I can't help that, so I can't help not fulfilling that promise. You mustn't blame me.' Unless somehow he could persuade you that that was a sound answer, I don't think he would get your vote at the next election. Anyway, your vote was quite a chance thing too, because the chemicals in your brain happened to be that way round that morning.

It's not only Prime Ministers that we expect to be responsible; we expect the errand boy to be responsible too. Woe betide him and his wage packet if he neglects his responsibility.

And then, what is more, we do not only act on the supposition that we are responsible, but we like to do so.

We like to feel that we are responsible

The man whose golf ball has just reached the green from the tee, and come pretty near the hole with the flag in, won't be too happy if you suggest that it's not to his credit at all. His judgment is merely the result of certain chemicals in his brain that happened to come together just then. The successful businessman won't easily part with the credit for being responsible

for his choice, and that it was by his willpower, careful forethought and planning that he built up his business.

Even in our games, we like to feel that we're responsible. At the Olympics in Tokyo at the moment, men and women strive for fame and glory, but the glory would all disappear if they were not responsible creatures. They made the choice to exercise self-control and the decision to discipline themselves, for which they personally can be praised and given credit. But if they have no judgment in what they do because it's quite beyond their power to control it, and it's just an accident, then what we have at Tokyo is rather a grim and pathetic spectacle. Certainly, it would be absurd to give them medals. You might as well give a medal to a pin for getting there first because it jumped quicker than the other pins towards the magnet, as to give a medal to an athlete if he is not a responsible being with a will and a choice and a power of judgment.

I think we would all admit that if we had to come to the conclusion that men and women are not responsible beings of value, dignity, and real worth, it would be outside of our concept of humankind. But there are times when many people wish they were not responsible beings. Some of us have a record in the past that is not worthy of credit. If our sense of choice is real and our will is free, then we must be held responsible for choosing and initiating our actions. So we feel within ourselves deep levels of selfishness to which we have given way, and we know that we have failed to act according to the standards we ourselves regard as right. We have all acted out of expediency against what the inner voice of conscience tells us is just and right.

If we are responsible people because we were created as such, then at times we have to face the unhappy fact that we do not love our creator, and sometimes do not care about him. We show an alarming indifference to him, while still remaining within the set bounds of social decency. If we could persuade ourselves that we are not responsible, but we were overruled in these unworthy actions and attitudes by forces that we could not control, then perhaps we should feel a bit more comfortable, not only in the present, but for the future.

I mention that again to indicate at the outset that there are very powerful, emotional reasons working within us and we have to allow for our personal bias.

So let's face the evidence; and yet I can't help feeling somehow or other that the very proposal to face a question, to sift the evidence and come to a conclusion, answers the question before we begin. If we are but accidents and not responsible; if our sense of choice is only an empty phenomenon that has no ground in fact, we are fools in facing any question. If we face it, when we have come to our decision we must be prepared to tell ourselves that it is utterly worthless because we arrived at it by a chance collocation of the chemistry of our brain, or emotions over which we have no control, no real choice or appeal.

The very fact, then, that we are prepared to face the question and sift the evidence seems to me to have given the conclusion away. We do regard ourselves as responsible beings with the power of choice and decision and will, and we shall need the very strongest evidence to prove it otherwise to ourselves.

The Christian view

I confess to you immediately that I shall not be extra good at making the evidence on the other side sound very strong, simply because I do not believe its conclusions and I regard the evidence as being inadequate. I will do my best, however, to give a fair account of certain leading arguments that have been put forward against the view that man is a responsible creature and not an irresponsible accident. Let me repeat that I start as a Christian, with the view that, whether man is a responsible creature with choice and will and forethought, this is a question that the human heart answers and knows intuitively. There is not really any need of logic and cunning argument to establish the fact.

The Christian view is that God has made humans and put his laws within them, written on their hearts (Heb 10:16). Mankind does have values. Maybe those values have become perverted, but men and women do have values that they intuitively know are bigger than themselves and originated outside themselves. They can make choices on the basis of those values and initiate actions according to those decisions. They have a conscience that will act as arbiter and tell them whether their choices and actions have been according to those God-given laws or not.

That is the Christian view from the Bible, as far as I understand it. People know these things intuitively and show that they know them by their daily behaviour and expressions. The very fact that one person accuses another of doing something wrong shows not only that the one who does the accusing has values, but expects the other person to acknowledge them, or else there's no sense in making an accusation. The very fact that a man excuses his behaviour shows that he has certain standards and feels obliged to render excuse when he falls below them. That wouldn't make sense if he didn't at the same time believe that those standards are meaningful and other people hold them.

That is the Bible's view, and a view of which I am convinced. There is, I want to say, more evidence for the existence of God and for the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ than intuitive knowledge. But on this matter, whether man is responsible or irresponsible, the Bible's view is that man knows intuitively that he is responsible. I therefore want to make that point and deal with the arguments that have come up against it; not necessarily spending overmuch time trying to prove that the Christian view is right, merely trying to show that what man knows intuitively to be right cannot be overturned by adequate reasons to the contrary.

Arguments against the Christian view

Now there are three avenues of attack on this view: (1) *physical evolution*; (2) *metaphysical theories*; (3) *psychological observation*.

Physical evolution

The case from physical evolution is very well known, but it would be easier to answer if all the evolutionists held the same viewpoint. It is a common fallacy, of course, expected of the man in the street nowadays, that he will believe that evolution has been proved and it is a very nice coherent doctrine in which all scientists agree. Nothing could be further from the

truth. It is a self-acknowledged theory that hasn't been proved, and over which not all scientists or evolutionists agree. There are different sorts of evolutionists.

Atheistic evolutionists

They must hold that matter is eternal, there is no God outside it, and all we see around us has come about by the process of evolution with no guiding hand or thought. They are in the strongest position for arguing against the fact that man is a responsible creature. Their argument is inadequate in my way of thinking, for this very simple reason. They can adduce some evidence of a sort for making us think that matter, once it was here, has evolved, but they have no answer whatsoever to the query, 'Where did matter come from?'

To believe that it came from nowhere is purely and simply a leap in the dark, an act of sheer faith and utterly unprovable; just as it is an act of sheer faith to say that matter has always existed and is eternal. As a Christian, I regret it if a person likes to take that leap of faith. I should have to acknowledge to him that I believe on the same principle of faith that the world was made by the word of God. But I will protest most loudly if he tries to tell me that, whereas I believe by faith in a creator and a creation, he believes evolution on the grounds of science, for he does nothing of the sort. He believes it on the grounds simply of wishful thinking. In fact, a lot of the evidence goes against him.

The second law of thermodynamics, for instance, tells us that, whereas energy is conserved, nevertheless it is constantly descending from the more organized form, where it is readily available, to a form in which it is not so organized and not so readily available, which gives the impression that this universe is running down. Somehow it was wound up by intervention from the outside, and it is gradually unwinding. It is such an important observation that the scientists themselves have designated it by a law: *the second law of thermodynamics*.

To believe atheistic evolution you have to say that that law does not apply, simply for the reason that you don't want it to apply any more. You want to believe that matter has come into existence out of nothing and has gradually gone on progressing into constantly higher and more intricate forms. To argue, as some do, that *continuous creation* will account for our world going on, does not come anywhere near answering the difficulties. We may suppose continuous creation, but sooner or later somebody is going to ask, 'Who does the creating, and where does the stuff come from that is constantly being created?' We are back at the old problem, 'Where did it all come from?', to which science as such has no answer. Here, faith must act.

Theistic evolutionists

But there are other evolutionists who tell us that evolution is merely a means by which matter, that perhaps came into being by God's creation, has become more and more complex. I do not agree that their evidence is adequate to prove that God has used evolution in their sense to bring about this complex universe. However, even if God had used that method, and their claims were right, they have nothing to say against the view that man is a responsible creature. They admit that their process of evolution is merely a mechanism that God the creator used to bring the world to this present state. They leave the initial act of creation in God's hands and have nothing to say against man being a responsible creature.

Curiously enough, the theories of both the atheistic and the theistic evolutionists imply that there has been *purpose* all the way along. They tell us that external forces acting on creatures, acting on beings I ought to say, have made those beings respond and adapt themselves to their environment, and the processes of natural selection have secured that the ones that adapt themselves best survive. But where did the power to adapt oneself come from? We come back to the very awkward, inescapable question: if something hadn't put the ability to respond within the being, how could it have responded? There's seems to be evidence of foresight somewhere.

Take the ordinary common experience of cutting a finger. When working a machine, if a man feels his finger has been cut by a blade, he instinctively withdraws his hand. His nervous system involuntarily takes over and removes his hand from the path of danger. Immediately the blood starts flowing, and for a little while it flows freely, cleansing away any germs that may have got into the wound. After a time, the blood begins to do something else: it begins to congeal and seal up the cut, lest it should go on bleeding and the man bleeds to death. Presently the finger starts to swell, and if it is a serious cut it will swell so much that it almost puts the finger out of action to give it time to rest while nature sends extra supplies to conquer remaining germs and provide new tissue. Presently, this tissue that looks like a scar falls off, and the finger looks very much as it did before. Then all these emergency operations begin to undo themselves and recede, and the finger is back to normal size and working again.

It is exceedingly difficult to resist the conclusion that, when there first were fingers, they were already equipped with that mechanism. It had not yet been used, but if that business of shutting off the blood supply hadn't been foreseen and already there, the first person to cut their finger would have bled to death; and if the mechanism wasn't there to send up antibodies to fight the germs they might have poisoned to death. How shall we explain the fact that the mechanism is there, even though it's never required? Even if a man never cuts himself it's there, ready to act in case of emergency.

I submit to you that not only does that make atheistic evolutionists look rather silly, but it puts a very big difficulty in the way even of theistic evolutionists. It argues design and forethought on a very big scale. I have not quoted an isolated feature in the universe around us, but one feature out of tens of millions that seem to show design. I'm aware of course that the argument from design has become old fashioned. We are told by some that it is meaningless. We are here and our bodies work; we happen to find food and our stomachs happen to work the way they do. It has just happened, so it is useless to argue design, because if things weren't like this we shouldn't be here at all.

I must say I find that argument very difficult to understand, let alone follow. Of course we're here! So is that door with a hole in it of a certain shape. When we came in, we put a key into the hole and it just happened to fit. If the key hadn't fitted, we wouldn't be in the room. There is, therefore, some design, some forethought between the shape of that key and the lock.

But more than that: this business of design and sense of forethought in creation isn't an analogy that we impose on a situation. In large part, we ourselves are made up of the same constituents as the universe around us, and therefore it is reasonable to argue that, if we can design by forethought, what we see in the universe that looks very much like forethought,

planning and design, is the very same thing that we experience ourselves. And what is more, the whole of science proceeds on the assumption that this world is built to a design.

When Harvey² was asked how he discovered the circulation of the blood, he replied that he'd simply noticed that the valves in the arteries and veins were in one particular direction, so that the blood could only flow one way down the arteries and not the other way. He therefore supposed that there was some purpose in this arrangement, and found out, of course, that there was. The blood is meant to flow down the arteries one way and up the veins the other way. Supposing that this phenomenon had been so arranged with purpose was what led Harvey to his discovery.

To argue that there is no design in the universe around us is to deny one of the basic planks of science itself. We might want to argue that it is not only a matter of faith, but it will be a leap of faith against a tremendous body of evidence and look like being very unscientific. I submit to you that evolutionary theories are no serious argument against our intuitive knowledge that we are responsible creatures; nor against the claims of practically all the serious religious leaders of the world; and pre-eminently against him who, with very good evidence, claims to be God incarnate.

Metaphysical theories

I can only stay a moment or two with objections that have been raised at the *metaphysical* level. There are many current brands of philosophy that tell us either that we're not free agents, or there is no God and man is the measure of all things. As I've already hinted, there are some who will tell us that our sense of truth and responsibility is all an illusion. There is no spiritual world to start the action, to make the choice, exercise the will, or to start matter going; there is nothing but matter.

Not many people hold that seriously, for the simple reason that our common sense cries out against it. Let the philosopher say his last word and we still believe that we can choose. Common sense rebels against the notion that it is an illusion. But suppose it is, then all our statements have no meaning either, for our selection that made them and our judgment that pronounced them are meaningless. No more meaning at any rate, than a picture produced by modern art, where an artist splashes a lot of paint on a canvas, rides over it aimlessly on a bicycle, and then looks round and tries to see some meaning in it. Therefore, if that is true, your statement that we're not responsible creatures is just as meaningless as my statement that we are, so we might as well stop arguing.

I have yet to see a philosopher who holds that view and dares to live up to it. So long as the philosophers don't act according to their belief in that particular, I shall not be willing to accept their philosophy. But we are told by others that man is the measure of all things; there are no absolute values and no absolute being outside of ourselves.

This is the view of *humanism*, but humanism runs into very great difficulties on the question of its values. It has no real answer as to why we live. It purports to tell us that humanism has the answer to true life, but it cannot give us any real, sensible values for living. For instance, it has no standard to bring to bear on the question of whether some people have

² William Harvey, 1578–1657.

a better standard of values than others. If there are no values outside ourselves, no absolutes, then it is nonsense talking about being guided by the majority opinion. Suppose anarchists somehow collected a majority and tore your premises to bits, then, as a humanist, you would have to agree that it was the right thing to do. Or else you'd have to admit that, although your view is in the minority, there's something about it that has essential worth in itself. It is not affected by the fact that only you or a few people hold it. When you start talking like that, you've already leapt into a realm of absolute values and, therefore, man's responsibility to absolute values.

Psychological observation

There have been arguments brought against the Christian view, however, from the point of view of *psychology*. Psychologists dealing with mentally disturbed people have found them obsessed with feelings of guilt. By analysis they have been able to trace those feelings of guilt to father fixations and such like things, and when the unfortunate patient has been able to see with his conscious mind what has been going on subconsciously underneath, very often he finds release. All credit and all praise to psychiatrists and psychologists who can so help their fellow men. But it is a very wide step to say that all feelings of guilt are the result of an unhealthy emotional state, or mere imagination that has no foundation in external fact.

Again, I shall not trouble long over this one, because I do not believe that any of you would seriously entertain it. You would not hold the view that healthy people cannot be held responsible for their actions; that they are merely predetermined by emotional states over which they have no control. Or, if they do have some control, the values upon which they make their judgments are not really significant, they can be explained away as hangovers from their childish impression of parental control.

If a man deliberately takes your wife or rapes your child, you may decide that he is emotionally disturbed, and therefore not responsible. But you will not hold the view that it doesn't matter. When you admit that it does matter, you are saying that there are values that are not merely hangovers from childhood. Those values are real, and rather than forfeit them, you would be willing to die for them. They are bigger than life itself.

Where Christianity is unique

I therefore submit to you that, at least from the angles we have viewed it, there are no serious arguments against the Christian view that humankind is responsible. But as I close, I want to mention a unique feature of Christianity that is relevant in this connection, because it has an answer to the dilemma in which we find ourselves—on the one hand we act as if we are responsible beings, but on the other hand at times we wish we weren't. That feature of Christianity is the cross and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

You will all have observed that in this, Christianity is unique. Its main point is not merely a message telling us to be good, but a message that God has come down to our world in the person of Jesus Christ and has suffered on a cross. That suffering was not merely the suffering of a martyr, but a suffering for sin that had to be undergone before God could forgive sinners. It was a suffering, on the other hand, that has made it possible for God to forgive men and women, because it does two things.

It finds men and women who say that they are indeed responsible, and there are absolute values that cannot just be glossed over. If humanity is to retain its respectability, those values must be honoured, and they have been honoured in the sanctions of God's law, exerted at the cross.

At the same time, there are men and women who are tempted to wish that they weren't responsible. They find it uncomfortable to face themselves because they find large areas where they have fallen below their own standards. The voice of conscience rises with feelings of guilt, because they know that they are not whole personalities; they are conscious that they have often deliberately done things that are wrong. For men and women in that uncomfortable position the cross of Christ says that God loves them and is himself prepared to accept them and endure all the damage and suffering that has been involved in and caused by their sinning.

Christianity has an answer to this dilemma. It makes it possible for men and women to retain their sense of absolute values and face the fact that they have failed. And yet to hold up their heads as responsible human beings in the knowledge that they are accepted by God and forgiven justly. The fact that Christianity answers this dilemma, which is deep-rooted in many a human heart, is a piece of evidence that is not to be brushed aside lightly. It might after all be a key that fits a lock; and the need that we intuitively feel as responsible creatures may turn out to be a very real thing, for which there is a very real answer—so perfect that the impression, that the one is designed by God and the other also designed by God, is overwhelming.

One final observation

The Christian message not only suits this dilemma, but it provides a person with strength to do something about this business of shortcoming and falling below the responsibility they feel, for it offers spiritual help through the joining of the personality of Christ alongside that man or woman's personality.

But there we come once more to the heart of the question. Christianity diagnoses a person's state as being a responsible creature who has fallen. It offers salvation on the terms that they may, if they will, use that responsible choice to accept God's forgiveness and the sacrifice of Christ, and, what is more, to receive within themselves the spiritual power and person of Jesus Christ.

As it is possible for a man or woman to try and stifle the intuitive sense of their responsibility, so it is possible for them to deliberately use their will to reject the Saviour that Christianity offers. Christianity says that, even if a man uses his free will to reject the Saviour that God offers, God will honour his responsibility, take his no for an answer, and leave that man eternally in his terrible dilemma.

Man's Relationship to This World

Is This World Ours by Permanent Freehold, or Expiring Lease?

This evening I want to develop something that I said at the end of last week's lecture. We were considering the Christian view of our world and its future, and we thought at the end about the implications for men and women. Tonight, I want to develop this question of our own future, to ask what potential we may have and what hope of progress.

I want to emphasize again that my intention and objective is very limited. I gathered that it was not altogether understood last week; therefore, I repeat it again and I want to underline it. By dismissing the criticism and showing that humanism offers nothing anywhere near better than Christianity, or even as reasonable, I am not assuming that Christianity has been proved true. To give you evidence for the proof of Christianity would require much longer than is available now. So then, I am not supposing that by demolishing these arguments I am offering proof positive for Christianity. You may feel that I have not demolished the arguments anyway, but my objective is merely to show that the criticisms that have been levelled against Christianity are not valid. Christianity need not be ashamed of itself; the humanist alternative is nowhere near so rational, and certainly cannot be described as better in any sense.

Human potential

When it comes to the question of human potential—man's progress as a being—Christianity and humanism have some common ground. Both preach that he has a potential and can, if he will, make progress. Their differences are large, of course. Humanism and Christianity differ in defining what that progress is, how it is to be attained, and what ground there is for hoping that it may reasonably be expected. But they do have this slender piece of ground in common—both of them preach progress.

The humanist view

Let me put before you statements on human progress by two or three humanists. I ought to add the warning that humanists are varied in their views, and therefore I use *humanism* as a very wide term covering all sorts of different beliefs.

Julian Huxley

There have been two critical points in the past of evolution, points at which the process transcended itself by passing from an old state to a fresh one with quite new properties. The first was marked by the passage from the inorganic phase to the biological, the second by that from the biological to the psychosocial. Now we are on the threshold of a third. As the bubbles in a cauldron on the boil mark the onset of the critical passage of water from the liquid to the gaseous state, so the ebullition of humanist ideas in the cauldron of present-day thought marks the onset of the passage from the psychosocial to the consciously purposive phase of evolution. Today, in the twentieth century, man, the evolutionary process, is at least becoming conscious of this and is beginning to study itself, with a view to directing its future course.³

Peter Medawar

I think it is most important to distinguish between four stages in the evolution of a brain. The nervous system began, perhaps, as an organ which responded only to elective stimuli from the environment; the animal that possessed it reacted instinctively or by rote, if at all. There then arose a brain which could begin to accept instructive stimuli from the outside world; the brain in this sense has dim and hesitant beginnings going far back in geological time. The third stage, entirely distinguishable, was the evolution of a non-genetical system of heredity, founded upon the fact that the most complicated brains can do more than merely receive instructions; in one way or another, they make it possible for the instructions to be handed on. The existence of this system of heredity—of tradition, in its most general sense—is a defining characteristic of human beings, and it has been important for, perhaps, 500,000 years. In the fourth stage, not clearly distinguishable from the third, there came about a systematic change in the nature of the instructions passed on from generation to generation—an evolution, therefore, and one which has been going at a great pace in the past 200 years.⁴

So then, according to Julian Huxley, if we have not already done so, we are about to enter a further stage in the evolutionary process when man has become conscious of his ability to direct evolution, and to direct it with some purpose.

J. B. S. Haldane

On the biological side, let us hear what Professor Haldane has to say about the possibilities that man shall interfere deliberately and purposefully in his evolution.

Clearly a gibbon is better pre-adapted than a man for life in a low gravitational field, such as that of a space ship, an asteroid, or perhaps even the moon. A platyrrhine with a prehensile tail is even more so. Gene grafting may make it possible to incorporate such features into the human stocks. The human legs and much of the pelvis are not wanted. Men who had lost their legs by accident or mutation would be specially qualified as astronauts. If a drug is discovered with an action like that of thalidomide, but on the leg rudiments only, not the arms, it may be useful to prepare the crew of the first spaceship to the *Alpha Centauri* system, thus reducing not

³ *The Humanist Frame*, Ed. Julian Huxley, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1961.

⁴ Reith Lectures, Lecture 6: The Future of Man – BBC Home Service, 20 December 1959.

only their weight, but their food and oxygen requirements. A regressive mutation to the condition of our ancestors in the mid-Pliocene, with prehensile feet, no appreciable heels, and an ape-like pelvis, would be still better.⁵ There is no immediate prospect of men encountering high gravitational fields, as they will when they reach the solid or liquid surface of Jupiter. Presumably they should be short-legged or quadrupedal. I would back an achondroplastic against a normal man on Jupiter.⁶

The professor thinks, therefore, that we could at least adapt human stock to the conditions on other worlds. And then, amongst many other things, he mentions the experiments that he would like to do with the brain.

Let us suppose that it becomes possible to induce proliferation of the formation reticularis. If this is possible in an adult, it will be first tried by a trained psychologist who volunteers for the job. Perhaps the first two volunteers will report a great extension of consciousness, while the third will go mad, or develop an inoperable brain tumour. Or perhaps it may be impossible to induce proliferation in adults and it will be necessary to do it in babies. Whilst this may seem horrible, I've often risked other people's lives in physiological experiments and though none died, at least one was permanently injured, but they were all volunteers and I was taking the same risks as they. The exploration of the interior of the human brain will be as dangerous as that of the Antarctic continent, or the depths of the oceans, but far more rewarding. To judge from the eagerness with which parents always urge their children to risk their lives in war, so that they have given their son, if he does not return, I suspect that in a society with different ideals to our own, many parents would be prepared to risk their baby's life in the hope that it might develop supernormal powers.⁷

How realistic his suggestions are, and how much he had his tongue in his cheek, I could not begin to say. He seems to be speaking earnestly of the serious possibility and purpose to interfere with human genes and alter the development of the human race, and in particular to expand the possibilities of the human brain.

Other humanists have maintained, and still do, that science can likewise improve human ethic. Monovski is quoted in that same debate as making the point that it is science which has taught us the real value of truth. It has made people see that adherence to truth is an exceedingly important thing, and society runs better when everybody adheres to it. This has become, so to speak, an ethic, and in its turn has involved other concomitant groups. If people are going to be truthful they must have personal and political freedom; they must be honest, and be prepared to let go of prejudice.

So much then for the statement of the programme of man's potential as it is viewed by some humanists.

⁵ [Some progress! D. Gooding].

⁶ J. B. S. Haldane, *A Mathematical theory of Natural and Artificial Selection: Part IV*, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society 23 (1927): 607-15.

⁷ J. B. S. Haldane, 'Biological Possibilities for the Human Species' in *Man and His Future*, Ciba Foundation 1963, Churchill, London.

The Christian view

The spiritual potential of mankind

Let us hear now what the Bible has to say and what Christianity preaches. On a spiritual level, the Bible preaches that man's potential is to become a son of God. I use the word 'become' advisedly and deliberately, quoting in fact a phrase from the Bible itself, 'But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' (John 1:12).

I need perhaps to elaborate, for it is a common view that Christianity teaches that everybody is a child of God. If it is meant by that, that all equally bear spiritual relationship to God, then it must be denied. Being creatures of God, the Bible does make the point that all know God as Father, in the sense that they know his fatherly care. But when the New Testament talks in this special sense of becoming a child of God, it is referring to a something that is not common to all. Men and women are born creatures of God, and it is open to them to become children of God and rise to a different and higher relationship with him. It is a relationship that involves receiving a *life*—a kind of life that they did not possess before. Becoming a child of God, then, is what the Bible advertises as man's potential.

The physical potential of mankind

The Bible has also something to say about man's future physically, and there again it holds out the hope to mankind of developing a different kind of human life to what it now has. The Bible says that our present bodies are *natural* bodies, but at the resurrection we shall be given *spiritual* bodies that do not depend on quite the same things for their life and maintenance. Christianity maintains that this is not merely a fairy tale, but that this changeover has already happened to one individual. The man, Jesus Christ, walked this earth in a body like ours, a natural body. He died, was buried, and rose again; not to resume exactly the same form of body as he had before, but a body that was now fundamentally changed, though still remaining a human body.

Christianity is not behind humanism in its programme. It has a potential to offer, both on the spiritual level and on the physical, but it does not propose to make the changes by means of experiments in chemistry and biology.

The Christian programme for mankind

But now let me come to the second part of my lecture. All of us are aware that Christianity and its programme for man's future have been criticized and that several very weighty objections have been levelled against it. We might sum up those objections in the phrase that Sir Gilbert Murray coined when he talked of Christianity along with other religions exhibiting a failure of nerve.

Allow me to trouble you with another longish quotation. Here is Gilbert Murray in his work, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, opening his chapter, 'The Failure of Nerve'.⁸

⁸ Originally published by the Beacon Press, Boston, 1951.

Any one who turns from the great writers of classical Athens, say Sophocles or Aristotle, to those of the Christian era must be conscious of a great difference in tone. There is a change in the whole relation of the writer to the world about him. The new quality is not specifically Christian: it is just as marked in the Gnostics and Mithras-worshippers as in the Gospels and the Apocalypse, in Julian and Plotinus as in Gregory and Jerome. It is hard to describe. It is a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and of faith in normal human effort; a despair of patient inquiry, a cry for infallible revelation; an indifference to the welfare of the state, a conversion of the soul to God. It is an atmosphere in which the aim of the good man is not so much to live justly, to help the society to which he belongs and enjoy the esteem of his fellow creatures; but rather, by means of a burning faith, by contempt for the world and its standards, by ecstasy, suffering, and martyrdom, to be granted pardon for his unspeakable unworthiness, his immeasurable sins. There is an intensifying of certain spiritual emotions; an increase of sensitiveness, a failure of nerve.

So Gilbert Murray sums up the distinctive atmosphere and doctrines of Christianity; distinctive, that is, from the older Greek systems of philosophy. To be fair to him, I ought to add that he goes on to say that, while this failure of nerve may or may not be a good thing, he himself makes it quite evident that on the whole he thinks it is bad.

Criticisms levelled against Christianity

Let me sum up and state these criticisms specifically for the purpose of our thinking now, and particularly Christianity's scheme of salvation and its potential programme for mankind.

Criticism 1: It shows a loss of faith in the goodness of the world around it

It begins to look on a great part of the world as bad, and manifests the desire to get away from it as quickly as possible and escape to a heaven that is one pure and everlasting delight. Certainly, if one were to adhere to certain hymns, one might regard the charge as being true. There has been a lot in Christian hymnology about getting away from this wicked, evil world as soon as possible and going off to a fairy tale heaven.

Criticism 2: It shows a loss of confidence in self

More seriously, it produces men and women who are guilt-ridden, preoccupied with a sense of sin and shortcoming, always concerned with how to make atonement and rid their consciences of the overbearing sense of guilt. It induces a willingness to make any sacrifice and suffering, to forgo the world, despise it if need be, if only they can get forgiveness for what they so mistakenly feel is their immeasurable unworthiness, sin, and guilt. If humanists have any thought of these things at all, they dismiss them, or learn to live with them as the mistaken hangovers of an incorrect upbringing in childhood.

Criticism 3: It encourages asceticism

And then it is alleged that Christianity encourages people to be ascetic. Not only do they regard the world around them as bad, but their bodies as something evil. They imagine that their goodness and holiness demand asceticism: rough treatment of the body, if not a positive despising of it. Very often they regard its lawful appetites as somehow beneath one's dignity, if not positively sinful. Once more, if one reads widely in Christian literature, including a good deal of medieval stuff and some modern interpretations of Christianity, one would feel the charge was justified. In the name of Christianity, many have taught that the body is evil, marriage is dishonourable, and the body is to be treated as an enemy, despised and ill-treated for the sake of the soul.

I will say two things about that in passing. (1) That didn't start with Christianity. You will find it much earlier, for instance in Plato. (2) This view of Christianity should not be confused with the biblical view of Christianity, which states something quite different, as we shall presently see.

Criticism 4: It leads to disregard for the needs of society in general

And then it has been alleged that Christianity's programme for human development and its emphasis on what the Bible calls *personal salvation* has been, if not antisocial, at least asocial. It encourages men and women to devote their energies chiefly to the salvation of their own souls, and to forget or generally disregard the needs of society in general. That is an allegation that has been levelled at Christianity not only by humanists, but against evangelical Christianity by those Christians who are not evangelical.

Criticism 5: It produces a slavish dependence upon God

The whole business of human potential, development and progress—what the Bible calls *salvation*, has been held to be degrading for inculcating a slavish, or at least an immature, dependence upon God.

For the humanist, who doesn't believe in God anyway, the development of this sense of dependence is nothing more than a 'father fixation', merely offering to people the cosy comfort of childhood days, instead of challenging them to develop independence. This idea of dependence, of being saved by faith in God, is a retrogressive step psychologically, and a degrading process.

Criticism 6: It makes people be good for fear of punishment

It has been said too that Christianity is most undesirable because human behaviour is conditioned by fear of punishment on the one hand, and hope of reward on the other. It offers a heaven if people behave themselves, and preaches a hell if they don't. People go in for being good, not for its own sake, but for the hope of a reward in heaven. It has made them stop doing evil, not because they dislike evil, but because they fear being sent to hell. To introduce such motives into ethics is to take a retrograde step; we ought to hold out no reward at all and let people be good just for the sake of being good, because goodness is a valuable end in itself. So the Christian doctrines of heaven and hell get dismissed.

Criticism 7: It fosters childish thinking

You heard Gilbert Murray complaining, as I read to you from his work, that Christianity is said to foster childishness, rather than mature thinking. It encourages men and women to appeal to authoritative revelation as an easy way out, instead of learning to think through their problems.

The Humanist programme for mankind

The humanist considers all these different processes involved in salvation as degrading. They don't lead to progress, but keep men and women in an immature and undeveloped state. If these charges are true, they are exceedingly serious. I hope I have stated them fairly. As far as I know, in raising these criticisms, I am not setting up an Aunt Sally or a straw man, just to knock down. These are objections that I have had levelled against me by colleagues of mine in the course of my small experience.

I would say in passing that Christianity at least has a rationale on which it is founded: it can give you some reasonable explanation of the hope that is within it. Whereas, when we come now to briefly consider humanism, we shall find that one of its grave weaknesses is that it has no rationale to give: no good grounds for holding out hope of the progress about which it talks in such glowing colour. Not all humanists are optimistic. There are humanists who are thoroughgoing pessimists, who see no hope and no future in this world that, according to them, has come to be by such a colossal accident. It has no genuine purpose within it, but only the appearance of purpose that may indeed one day be put to an end by a similarly colossal accident, making a mock of any appearance of purpose that mankind has entertained.

Let us think about the propositions of what we may call the *optimistic humanists*. We shall observe their emphasis on progress along material, physical and biological lines. Surely it is fair to say that Christianity is not against any progress in the realm of the physical, material or biological, if it is genuine progress. It would be enough perhaps to quote the names of half a dozen scientists who have been thoroughgoing Christians; not claiming that their science somehow buttresses the truth of Christianity, but just to point out the fact that Christianity is not in conflict with true science, nor a stick in the mud opponent of progress.

But of course, Christianity will refuse to be content with progress that is nothing more than physical and biological. In these last years we have certainly made tremendous strides in the building of machines that simulate the human brain; but even if we could make a machine that would do everything better than we could, we should still be left with something less than human. We may be able to make a computer that can beat you at chess, but it will not be able to share your system of values or tell you why it enjoys playing chess. Many animals possess greater powers than humans. For instance, dogs can hear far better than we do.

Mere development along physiological and biological lines isn't necessarily progress, even judged by the standards we have attained already. We shall very rightly look to humanists to be able to show that there has been some progress in the realm of ethics and personality, and that there is good hope for better progress in the future. I may recur, for instance, to the claim that it is science that has brought to life the importance of truth. I must

say that such a claim cannot hold water and reverses the process of history. It was the desire for truth that led to science, and not science that led to a desire for truth. Many philosophies that are not even Christian announced the value and importance of truth long before our modern scientists, or even the Greek scientists, got going on purely scientific investigation.

Nor ought we to be misled by the advances that have been made as a result of science in what we may call social relations and social comfort. Psychology teaches us valuable lessons on how to bring up a child. The parent who hides his head to that knowledge is a sheer fool. I cannot really see how you may claim that a parent who fails to make use of it has somehow made an advance in ethics.

Science and humanism do not provide us with an absolute system of values

Science may point us to new possibilities of action, new facts about situations that we didn't know before, but it still leaves it to the individual man or woman to make the choice. If science were asked, 'Why should a man be truthful?' it can provide no ultimate answer, no absolute system of values. Moreover, science has yet to explain what it is within each one of us that, even when we come to deal with purely scientific questions and matters of evidence, we constantly feel a strong urge to overlook some evidence and concentrate on others. Why do we do it?

This criticism of science's inability to provide us with a serious and absolute standard of values by which we may judge behaviour, or determine which behaviour ultimately is better or not better, is an exceedingly important thing. It is all the more important when people like Haldane talk about the possibilities of biological experiments on human beings. Suppose science is eventually able to take your legs off, so that you'll be better able to get around the moon, will it be able to tell you why it is a better thing to be on the moon anyway? Suppose science can alter the area of consciousness in the brain, does the scientist have the right eventually to come in and determine which babies shall be so altered?

These are questions that we shall want to know, because as science proceeds we shall find ourselves more and more surrounded by experts whose scientific knowledge we cannot possibly hope to check. Therefore, we shall want to know whether we are to trust them or not. It will not in fact relieve the ordinary man in the street from his necessity of trusting somebody, or to demand a system of values by which he shall decide whom to trust. In that, of course, humanism is not altogether different from Christianity. It tells a man that in the end he must learn to trust. Only Christianity exhorts a man or woman to trust Jesus Christ, but then our Lord gives us very good reasons for trusting him.

Science and humanism have not produced any theories to make mankind less selfish

Can science point to any real ethical and moral improvement in men and women that has so far been brought about by unaided means? It is not a question merely of making the world just a bit more pleasant to live in. Pirates on a pirate ship have the sense to see that they'd better treat each other decently and act fairly, if they want to succeed in their venture. It doesn't necessarily mean that what they're doing is the right thing. The Bible's indictment is

not merely that man has indulged in all sorts of abominable vices at times, but that he is basically selfish and plagued at his very heart with more than a tendency to go his own way. I am not aware that science has made any difference to that tendency, or that humanism has produced any theories or values that have made him less selfish.

When we ask what concrete evidence there is—not merely an article of faith, but concrete evidence—that we are now on the verge of this third stage in evolution where we are able, purposefully, to control our development, humanists do not tell us. In the passage I read to you, Julian Huxley talked about bubbles on a cauldron, and he likened it to the present upsurge of humanism. It seems that he argues it as evidence that we are on the threshold of the third stage in evolution. As far as I can see, that is a grossly circular argument. Where is the evidence that we're doing anything different to what scientists have been doing for centuries?

As far as I can see, humanism, as in so many places, asks us to take a leap of faith and hope here. However, I must add that, supposing the hopes and faith of humanists were grounded in evidence, they still have no real hope for the individual. All they can talk of are adaptations of man's brain and body ten thousand years from now. It can add little colour and hope, and little meaning for the individual man in the street. It seems to me to be unfair of the humanists to condemn Christianity as though it were all pie in the sky tomorrow, when all they can offer is progress ten thousand years from now, which is about the time Haldane thinks it will take to manipulate these mutations.

Objections raised against Christianity

Let me come finally to the objections that have been raised against Christianity. I want to repeat that in thus expressing my dissatisfaction with the progress and arguments of humanists, I am not supposing that I have thereby proved the truth of Christianity. Nor in what I'm now about to say, as I try to deal as a Christian with the arguments that have been levelled against Christianity, am I supposing that, by answering the objections, I have offered proof positive for Christianity. I want to underline that once more.

Objection 1: Christianity teaches escapism

Many of the objections currently raised are not fair to the factual evidence. For instance, let us take this Christian view of the world. I freely admit that there have been hundreds of Christians who have exhibited a world-denying attitude, in the sense that they've run off and climbed up pillars and lived on the top of them,⁹ or shut themselves away from the world and preached that the end of the world is so near that there's no sense going about one's daily business. 'This world is all an illusion,' they said; it is bad and must be escaped from.

Against those interpretations of Christianity, I will personally appeal to the Bible itself. The Old Testament view of man, and man's attitude and relationship to the physical world, is that man was made to have dominion over the earth and to subdue it.

⁹ See this interesting article in *The Telegraph* about the St. Simeon Stylites: ['Syrian monastery where St Simeon sat on a pillar for four decades damaged by missile attack'](#).

And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' (Gen 1:28)

God saw that the earth was good and put man in charge of it. Everywhere the Old Testament insists on the goodness of God's handiwork, and on man's sacred duty as a responsible steward to develop and use the earth. The Bible does say that he failed in his stewardship, sinned against God, and thereby has reduced himself to a slave instead of a master. He needs to be saved, for the present situation is not what God originally intended.

When the Bible maps out God's future for a redeemed mankind, the New Testament recurs to the Old Testament words. It says, 'Now it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come' (Heb 2:5). His intention is to put this habitable world under the control of man, when redeemed man has been taught his deeper lessons to recognize evil, and has the power to overcome it. When he arrives at that state, he shall not go off into some ethereal heaven, but shall have a very material world under his control.

One day this earth is going to be dissolved, but redeemed man is going to be put in charge of a very literal world, a very literal universe. The Bible itself declares that there is to be a new heaven and a new earth—not merely a new heaven, but a new earth also (Rev 21:1). The Bible states that matter is good, and amongst many of his other activities redeemed humanity will have charge of a redeemed and purified universe.

Christianity does not preach escapism. As for the charge that it is all a question of running away from the world, that can be shown to be foolish in light of the some two hundred and fifty occasions when the New Testament firmly declares that Jesus Christ is literally coming again. If there is one thing the New Testament says clearer than others, it is that Jesus Christ is literally coming again. The disciples, who were asked to touch him after his resurrection to notice that he was flesh and bones (Luke 24:39), were told, 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). The world hasn't seen the last of Jesus Christ. He certainly hasn't abandoned this world.

This is not escapism. Although it may sound apocalyptic to some and provoke them to dismiss Christianity as irresponsible, the mere facts must be allowed to speak for themselves. The New Testament talks of Christ's return and reign over this world.

Objection 2: Christianity teaches asceticism

Again I must admit that there have been many people who have practised asceticism in the name of Christianity. Many still do, and lingering in the minds of many who are not given outwardly to asceticism, you will find ascetic ideas: suspicions that somehow sex is bad, and we shall be more holy in definite ratio to our discomfort.

But to show that this is not the Christian idea, perhaps it ought to be enough to quote Paul's word to his converts at Colossae. In that epistle Paul discusses what he calls 'will worship' (Col 2:23 KJV): despising the body, fasting, observance of days, and the severe discipline of contemporary Gnostics. He dismisses it all as of absolutely no value, and urges his Colossian converts to eschew and run away from such ascetic practices, for the simple reason that they are of no virtue against our sinful tendencies (vv. 16–20).

You may certainly quote Paul as saying 'But I discipline my body and keep it under control' (1 Cor 9:27). Paul expected of Christian missionaries, and Christian people in general, an athlete's way of life; not a flabby Christianity of self-indulgence, but a vigorous and virile Christianity of self-control. That is far from the ascetic idea and outlook, which he himself roundly condemned openly in his epistles.

It does not help a soul to get near to God, nor to salvation, to practise asceticism. The Bible says that to forbid people to marry, or to teach abstinence from certain foods is not Christianity, but 'teachings of demons' (see 1 Tim 4:1-3). These are the straightforward words of the New Testament. *Christianity does not teach asceticism.*

Objection 3: Christianity plagues people with feelings of guilt

Let's come deeper to the heart of the matter, to the charge that Christianity plagues a man with feelings of guilt. Playing on those guilt feelings, it preoccupies him with his failures and makes his life one constant endeavour to get rid of guilt and somehow make atonement.

It is true to say that the Bible preaches that men and women have sinned, and the Bible preaches against sin. You may call it by what name you care to, but whatever our persuasion we must face the fact that we often behave far below our own standards, and a good deal of human misery is caused by such behaviour. But I'm not sure that it is true to accuse Christianity of leaving people ridden with guilt complexes, or that Christianity plays on them.

In fact, the Bible's account of the way sin has come in is a far more kindly thing than many folks have realized. The Bible diagnoses the human problem as spinning not primarily on the acts of individuals, but from a flaw of the human race in the person of its progenitor. It doesn't tell a person that he is responsible for being a sinner, but tells him that he was born a sinner not by his own fault. Then the Bible says that men and women can be saved. In very clear and outright terms it says not only that there is pardon and forgiveness, but a person can receive that pardon and forgiveness and know it. This means that we can know we are accepted by God and shall never come into condemnation.

If that sounds too strong, let me quote you Scripture itself: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom 8:1). Our Lord himself is quoted as saying that the person who comes to him and believes him, not only has eternal life here and now, but shall never come into condemnation (John 5:24). It is the number one point in Christian salvation that a man is forgiven utterly and completely; not merely forgiven up to the time being, but assured that God receives him and accepts him for Christ's sake and will never cast him out (John 6:37).

If that self-assurance is going to be accused of keeping a man ridden with guilt, I shall protest that the argument is exceedingly unfair to the facts. The Bible says that this acceptance and forgiveness comes not from what a person does or deserves, but solely through the sacrifice of Christ at Calvary. I want to emphasize it, because I've discovered that it's not generally known that the Bible preaches that men and women can have forgiveness through Christ and know now on earth that they will never come into condemnation, but are eternally accepted by God. *Christianity releases people from feelings of guilt.*

Objection 4: Christianity discourages human effort

As to the charge that Christianity discourages human effort, again it is partly true, partly untrue. Christianity does preach that, to be saved, a person must depend solely on Christ. No one can buy salvation, not even in the currency of good behaviour, and therefore is dependent on Christ. The Bible preaches it openly.

Many people object to this. They say, 'Why shouldn't we be encouraged to do our very best? We don't like being told that we cannot do anything for our salvation. It takes away our own initiative and the desire to strive.'

So, even when God will give salvation for free, there are those who object. They seem to want it both ways, in spite of the fact that experience shows that any who try to do their best still come short, and if salvation depended on their efforts they would be ridden with conscience for the rest of their days. The more they try, the more they will be guilt-ridden. The Bible says that salvation is a question of a personal relationship with God. A personal attitude of the heart is far more important than individual actions. Individual actions spill out of the heart, but the main and fundamental thing is a personal relationship with God.

Therefore, God insists that salvation should come through a readjustment of the heart: a willingness to bow to him and believe in this deep and personal sense, to receive God as Saviour, and not by somehow paying him in the currency of good behaviour. *Christianity does not discourage good behaviour, but the main thing is a personal relationship with God.*

Objection 5: Christianity encourages cupboard love

Having said that, I hope it gives the lie to the charge that Christianity encourages people to be good out of cupboard love, and the hope that they will get a reward of heaven for being good. Christianity says no such thing; it says the opposite. You cannot buy heaven, you cannot buy salvation, you cannot buy God's love, and you cannot deserve it. These things are given free, and they can be received by us all while we are still sinners, if only, in genuine repentance and a willingness to be saved from sin, we are prepared to cast ourselves totally and unreservedly on Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. *Christianity does not encourage cupboard love.*

Objection 6: Christianity bribes people by fear

I merely want to say that we should not be deceived into thinking that fear is always an unhealthy thing. If we had no fear, we should soon end up under a bus, or sitting in a fire. Fear is a healthy thing, unless it is perverted by submerged complexes. A person who does not fear, in the true sense of fear, and wants to avoid evil, is lacking in his moral make-up; just as a person who, under the stress and strain of war, gives up fearing a gun or a bomb and becomes careless and hysterically funny in the face of the danger of loss of life.

The Bible unashamedly preaches that to choose against God will lead to an eternity that is an unqualified disaster. *This is indeed a fearful thing, and must be avoided if we have any true sense of the value of man.*

Man's Relationship to God

The Christian Gateway

This evening I wish to discuss with you the two subjects of *repentance and faith*; those exercises of the heart which are necessary to enter and enjoy God's salvation personally and practically. They are generally spoken of in that order. 'Repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ' was the apostolic description (see Acts 20:21). Necessary as repentance is, by itself it is not enough. It is the negative side and faith is the positive side. It's not enough just to repent without positive faith.

What is repentance?

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' (Matt 3:1-2)

I propose to discuss with you the ministry of John the Baptist, which was primarily concerned with this matter of repentance, and though he lived before the full blown Christianity that was to come, nevertheless we may learn many a helpful lesson from him. He was, so to speak, the specialist in the preaching of repentance. But before we do so, perhaps we ought to pay a little attention to the meanings of words.

Unhappily, in the English language, the word *repentance* has gathered around it a lot of ideas that, strictly speaking, belong to other words and not to repentance itself. That is because our English word 'repentance' has some relationship with the Latin word *poenitentia*, which later on became in the English language, 'penance'. That has produced a build-up of ideas in people's minds that, when the Bible talks of repentance, it is prescribing a sort of penance, a miserable state of soul. It was the kind of thing the Jews did on their great Day of Atonement, when they afflicted their souls. For other people, it has come to mean a feeling of remorse and self-loathing. With others it indicates certain meritorious works, which they feel obliged to do to make reparation to God for their sins.

As you know, the New Testament is translated not from Latin, but from Greek. In Greek, the word for repentance means 'a change of mind'. It is primarily an activity of a person's mind, rather than emotions. It has to do with moral judgment, and it means that when a person repents, he or she comes to radically change their thinking. From indulging in sin as though it were right or harmless, or that it didn't matter, they come to change their thinking on that score, agree with God, and if need be condemn themselves.

The story of Esau

This illustrates so well the difference between feelings and a change of mind—a change of moral judgment. ‘Esau . . . sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears’ (Heb 12:16–17). You might have said, ‘There is evidence of contrition on Esau’s part; look at his tears and his grief.’ But he didn’t get the birthright, and the Bible explains why ‘he found no place of repentance’ (KJV).

That was true also of Isaac, his father. He had given the birthright to Jacob, and was now no longer at liberty to change his mind and give it to Esau. Though he felt very sore about losing the birthright, Esau did not change his mind over that initial decision, ‘I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?’ (Gen 25:32). If you’d given him the choice between the birthright and porridge, once again he would have chosen porridge, even though it would cost him the birthright.

There are many people who have felt within them the desirability of God’s salvation. They have been deeply moved as they have listened to preaching; but when they see it means giving up and letting go of things that are sinful—maybe companionships that are unhealthy, business advantages that are dishonest, or whatever it may be—though they would like salvation with all their hearts, they are not prepared to repent. They will not face those issues—perhaps little things, though to them they may seem big things—and judge them for what they are. They are not prepared to agree with God that they are wrong and sinful, and consequently all their deep feeling and desires after God’s salvation never materialize. They are not prepared to repent.

I remember a woman telling me so outright. She said, ‘I need to be saved and I would like to be saved, but I’m just not prepared to give up certain things I do that I know are sinful.’

The preaching of John the Baptist

The historian Luke records the fact that there were two main results from John the Baptist’s strong preaching of repentance.

(When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.) (Luke 7:29–30)

1. The tax collectors and the people in general ‘declared God just’

Remember that the word ‘justified’ does not mean ‘to make righteous’. You can’t make God righteous; he is that already. It means ‘to declare somebody to be right.’ When these tax collectors and people heard John speak and denounce them as sinners, they admitted it was true. God was right, though it meant that they were wrong. That is repentance, and in public admission of that fact they got themselves baptized. Being baptized didn’t wash away one of their sins; water has no efficacy at all to atone for sin before God.

In fact, they had to wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus. John told them that, in addition to being baptized, they must believe on the Lord Jesus to obtain the forgiveness that they

needed. But the first step was necessary: they must agree that God was right, they were wrong and in need of salvation. His judgment of their sin was just, and if they had what they deserved it would be God's unqualified judgment.

2. The Pharisees 'rejected the purpose of God for themselves'

They also came and listened to John. They were nominally interested in anything that was religious, but when they heard what kind of preaching it was—a forthright condemnation of sin and a call to repentance—they refused to be baptized. They told John bluntly they didn't see the need of such a thing. It might be all right for a few publicans maybe, and the heathen, but they didn't need to be baptized.

Sure enough, they would have admitted that they were guilty of the occasional slip and one or two peccadillos, but they genuinely thought that their good deeds did outweigh the bad and there wasn't any need for all this fuss. Being the God of love that he is, he surely didn't expect people to get concerned like this and make a public show of affairs? They felt that they were more or less good enough as they stood, and I've no doubt that they dismissed John's preaching as the ranting of an over keen evangelical. But the Holy Spirit's comment is that they rejected the purpose of God. They refused to agree that God was right and they were wrong. As you might expect, they did not get saved, though events took a very curious turn with them.

When our Lord came and pronounced the forgiveness of sins to the repenting and now believing people, and told them explicitly that their sins were forgiven and that they might know it, these self-same Pharisees took objection to that too. They said that this was blasphemous. To tell people that their sins were forgiven was more likely to encourage them in sinning.

Our Lord's comment was that these Pharisees were like children sitting in the marketplace. You couldn't please them either way. 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn' (Matt 11:17).

They wouldn't have this matter of being saved, and it is not difficult to see why their sins were not forgiven. They were not saved, and for other people to come alongside and claim that *they* were saved would understandably provoke their indignation and jealousy. But the root of this attitude is an unwillingness to agree with God against oneself, a refusal to change one's own thinking and let it be conformed with God's word.

Without throwing any stones at all, but just being realistic, I can point out how common that attitude is today. As in the days of these Pharisees, it cloaks itself with the outward works of Christianity. Make the test yourself. If you find people who deny that they deserve the extreme penalty of sin and the eternal perdition that our sins deserve, see how many of them will likewise deny that it is possible to know oneself saved here in this life. The two attitudes spring from the same root.

There is no salvation without repentance

The Bible declares that the wages of sin is death, that is, eternal death (Rom 6:23). To deny that is to deny God. It states plainly that here in this life we can know we are born again and our sins are forgiven. To say that it is impossible for anybody to be sure shows an unrepentant

heart that refuses to change its thinking and agree with what God says. It must be evident to us all that without such repentance there is no salvation.

Now let's think a little bit more deeply on this matter. I want to point out that when people came to John the Baptist he only baptized each person once, as far as we know. You may think that's a superficial observation to make, but it is nevertheless important. People didn't sin today and come and say, 'John, baptize me, I've sinned and I repent,' and then tomorrow they did another sin, repented, and he baptized them again.

No, it was being willing to admit that the whole of life, from first to last, was stained with sin and unworthy of God's heaven. When folk were prepared to admit that their whole life fell short of God's requirement and deserved his judgment, then they were ready to see that the Lamb of God takes away not odd sins here and there, but deals with the whole of a person's life, and can offer forgiveness once and for all.

That still remains true, though we should not confuse the issue in our minds. Following that once and for all repentance, it is perhaps unnecessary to point out that a Christian will find it necessary to repent seven, or perhaps seventy, times a day. When first we come to Christ for salvation, we're dealing with the whole of life. We receive forgiveness and justification that covers it in total. We admit that the whole of life is a wreck, deserving the wages of sin, and from the Saviour's hand we take eternal life, which by its very nature and definition knows no end. But, because he has a salvation that is as big as eternity, that does not mean that a Christian grows slack and careless.

When a person gets saved it is often the fact that there are many things he or she does, and attitudes they adopt, that are sinful, although they are unaware of it at the time. God loves them even while they are yet sinners, and if they come and admit it, God is prepared to save them. But after that God will raise the matter of individual sins and require them to repent, judge them to be wrong, and allow the Saviour to save them from sin. If we do that, we shall not be judged. But as Christian people who possess eternal life, if we refuse to cooperate with God in these matters and allow sin to carry on unjudged, then God will take very decided steps to teach us that sin is sin and bring us to judge it in the light of his presence.

The emphasis on works in John's preaching

But let us think again of the stress on works that John the Baptist made in his preaching. 'Bear fruits in keeping with repentance,' he said (Luke 3:8). I hasten to add that he is not alone in this. This is not some pre-Christian attitude that we Christian people can afford to neglect. The Apostle Paul announced before King Agrippa that he likewise taught all his converts that they should perform deeds in keeping with their repentance (Acts 26:20). We must study that a little bit more closely. What does that mean? We are told at length what it meant with John.

And the crowds asked him, 'What then shall we do?' And he answered them, 'Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.' Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, 'Teacher, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Collect no more than you are authorized to do.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.' (Luke 3:10-14)

In a most forthright manner, John lays it down that works are to accompany repentance. Now at once, we may be certain that none of those works earns forgiveness, or else the Bible would glaringly contradict itself. None of those works made reparation or atonement for sins before God. That can only be done by the sacrifice of Christ. Why then were the works necessary? They were necessary as evidence that the repentance was genuine. If those works had not been forthcoming, one might have seriously doubted it.

Suppose I have here a man, and he comes asking the way of God's salvation. He professes to be repentant for his past life. He sees that forgiveness can only be had through Christ, and forgiveness is offered free without any works at all. But enquiry shows that the man has stolen one thousand pounds from a friend of his. The money is safely lodged to his own account and he could pay it back if he wanted to.

'I want to be saved,' he says, 'but tell me, does it mean that I've got to give that money back?'

And you say, 'Of course it does.'

'Well,' he says, 'I'm not prepared to do that.'

'But I thought you said just now that you were repentant.'

'I am,' he says, 'and I want my sins to be forgiven.'

Oh no. There must be that 'work' of giving back the money, otherwise how can the man possibly say that he is repentant?

Let me take another example. You doubtless will remember the terms that the Apostle Peter laid down to the Jews in the city of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, '*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*' (Acts 2:37-38)

You may have observed how different those terms are from what happened when Peter preached the gospel in the house of Cornelius, the Gentile centurion. He had not reached the end of his sermon when that gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them there and then, and it was not until after they had received the Holy Spirit that those people were baptized.

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word . . . Then Peter declared, 'Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?' And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. (Acts 10:44-48)

Why then the difference? Well certainly not because God has favourites and is prepared to save some people and give them his Holy Spirit on easier terms than others. It's not that at all; but you see, the Jews in Jerusalem were guilty of something that Cornelius was not guilty of.

In Jerusalem

The apostle was preaching to people who had stood in that city and shouted, 'Away with him, crucify him!' (John 19:15). They had done it publicly. Now they professed to be sorry and repentant. They needed God's salvation for their desperate sins, and in particular they needed forgiveness for the sin of the murder of Christ. Of course, repentance was the paramount condition; but if their repentance was genuine they must be willing to show publicly in that same city that they had renounced their former verdict. Publicly they had said, 'Away with him, crucify him', and if they were genuinely repentant they would now publicly confess they were wrong and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. If they were not prepared thus to show the genuineness of their repentance, do you think the apostles would publicly have received them as Christians?

In the house of Cornelius

Here the issue did not arise, of course. Cornelius had not been in Jerusalem; he was not personally guilty of the murder of Christ. That didn't mean that his life was not dotted all over with wrong practices, but the man was genuinely ready to confess his sin. There was nothing glaringly outstanding, and the matter of his salvation could proceed. But I stress again, all those works that are the evidence for our repentance being genuine, all of them together cannot bring us forgiveness. They do not buy God's forgiveness, nor purchase salvation. That must come solely through Christ.

The work of the Holy Spirit

There is one further consideration that we ought to remember before we proceed to discuss the other matter of faith, and that is the power of God's gracious Holy Spirit helping us towards repentance. In God's supreme mercy, he does not leave our consciences to themselves. He does not leave us merely with the evidence of natural law, or even the evidence of his written word. From time to time the Holy Spirit visits men and women to illuminate their needs, pressing upon them the need for repentance and the seriousness of sin. We should thank God for that lovely ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is described in the Bible as the rain that comes down from heaven, softening the ground that the ground might eventually yield its fruit and receive the seed and that seed might grow. 'He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth' (Hos 6:3). We thank God that he does not leave us to our own choosing, but follows us constantly, and sometimes very vividly and persistently in the days when specially he visits us.

It is possible to reject him

When the Holy Spirit has done everything he can to enlighten the mind, inform the conscience, and urge repentance and faith in Christ, it is still possible for the human spirit to make its own decision. Just as it is possible for the human spirit to say yes to God, it is possible to say no. The Bible is very solemn on this score. When the human heart deliberately and with eyes open turns its back on God and says its final no to the pleadings of God's Holy Spirit, there comes a time when it is impossible to restore such a person to repentance (see Heb 6:4–6).

Now those verses have upset some people, and sometimes they have upset Christians with over-tender consciences. Sometimes genuine Christians get under the weather in health, hit by pain and suffering and misfortune and calamity, and come to have doubts. They get it into their heads that they have committed this unpardonable sin, and go through months, and sometimes years, of unutterable anguish. Far be it from me to cause or precipitate such a feeling in anybody's mind.

Let us notice what the verses say: 'It is impossible . . . to restore them again to repentance.' That is to say, you will never get them to change their minds again; they will be permanently indifferent. If anybody is in great distress of mind, longing to be saved but fears he or she can't because they might have committed the unpardonable sin, let me tell you that the very fact that they feel concerned at all shows they haven't committed that sin. For of those people it is said that you will never get them to change their minds. They're happy to go on as they are, and they turn their backs on God and his Holy Spirit by their personal choice. Being unable to do anything more for them—he would if he could—God lets them go the way of their choice, and they're quite happy to do that. That is a sad thing. Let it warn any of us with whom God's Holy Spirit might be striving at this moment, to decide in the right direction and yield to the Saviour, lest we weary God's Holy Spirit and pass beyond the point of no return.

What is faith?

I begin by a reading from holy Scripture that illustrates, perhaps better than anything in the New Testament, the meaning and action of faith.

So he came again to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. And at Capernaum there was an official whose son was ill. When this man heard that Jesus had come from Judea to Galilee, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death. So Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe.' The official said to him, 'Sir, come down before my child dies.' Jesus said to him, 'Go; your son will live.' The man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him and went on his way. As he was going down, his servants met him and told him that his son was recovering. So he asked them the hour when he began to get better, and they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' The father knew that was the hour when Jesus had said to him, 'Your son will live.' And he himself believed, and all his household. This was now the second sign that Jesus did when he had come from Judea to Galilee. (John 4:46–54)

Necessary as repentance is, by itself it is not enough. It is the negative side; faith being the positive side. It's not enough just to repent without positive faith. We might learn that from the vivid example of Judas Iscariot. When he was confronted with the outcome of his foul deed, 'he changed his mind' (Matt 27:3). If we ask how genuine his repentance was, we can only observe what he did. '[He] brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood"' (vv. 3–4). Manfully, he confessed his wrong and made restitution as far as he possibly could. But he wasn't saved. There was no glimmer of personal faith in the Lord Jesus; no evidence of reaching out his empty hand to take in reality from the Saviour that morsel of bread that he had taken before

in utter insincerity (see John 13:21–30). He didn't believe; no personal relationship was formed between him and the Saviour. There was no faith. It drove him to commit suicide.

The early Christian preachers were insistent on this thing. If they found people who had been baptized merely by John's baptism, good as that was, they would insist that they went the next step. John's message had been to repent of sin as a necessary preliminary, but then they had to personally believe in Jesus. First, repentance towards God; then, faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).

I do trust I am not making things sound difficult. Faith should be the easiest and simplest thing in all the world, but many people find it difficult. Let me try and strip away many of the difficulties that have encumbered people in their thinking. As I proceed through these various things and point out what faith is not, you will observe that I am not progressively making the thing harder, but easier.

Faith is not presumption

Let us just start here and clear our thinking. Faith is our response to God and to something God has said; it is not just wishful thinking.

Sometimes, if you ask of somebody, 'Do you believe in the Lord Jesus?', they will say, 'Oh, I have great faith.'

Then, if you ask, 'Are you saved?' they will say, 'Well, I do my best to live out the Christian life.'

If you say, 'But you surely must know that salvation is not that way round: it is not by works,' the reply will come, 'I don't think it really matters what we believe, so long as we sincerely believe it. It's sincerity that counts. So long as we are all sincere and seeking the right thing, then we shall all end up the same way.'

Shall we really? That is utter presumption. If you are ill with the flu and go to your medicine cupboard where you have twenty bottles of different sorts of medicine, try the argument out. Select one at random, whatever it is, and say to yourself, 'It doesn't matter what these doctors give us. So long as we are sincere when we take it, it will work.' Well that is nonsense, and could be fatal.

Cain and Abel

The Bible reminds us of this in a story we know so well, the story of Cain and Abel (Gen 4). 'By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain' (Heb 11:4). It wasn't that one day he somehow had a bright idea that this might be a good thing to do. God had indicated to our first parents that he required sacrifice and the shedding of blood; without that there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22). Abel, in faith, responded to what God said and came in God's way.

Cain, on the other hand, came his own way. I've no doubt that he was full of confidence that his sacrifice would be accepted too, and he may well have argued with himself that his sacrifice was as good as Abel's and perhaps a little bit better. After all, Abel only had to let the lamb grow and feed it occasionally, whereas he had to work hard to till the soil. All Cain's unbounded confidence did not bring him acceptance with God, for it was sheer presumption.

Wishful thinking will not do. We must see that our faith is the genuine thing; that is, in God's word, in response to what God has said and done. If God has said something, then it is not presumption for me to believe it with all my heart. Sometimes it is said to people who claim that they are saved and know it, that it is awfully presumptuous. That is not so at all, of course. When the Bible says, 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13), it is not presumption for us to say that we know it. In fact, it would be making God a liar to say that it couldn't be known. Faith is a response to God and what God has said.

Faith is not feelings

At the same time, as Christian preachers have laboured to point out, faith is not a question of feelings. Faith is our response to God's fairness, and let us not confuse the fact with any consequent feelings. Our feelings sometimes reflect the true state of affairs, but very often they don't.

Here's a man and he's on his summer holidays, sitting on the beach in a deckchair, in a cosy little bay in the south of Cornwall. He dozes off in the sun, and as he sleeps the tide quietly creeps in. It has already surrounded the other parts of the beach and has crept up behind him. The bay is quite cut off; behind him are only sheer high cliffs and he can't escape. The man is in deep peril, but he's snoozing away quite happily in his deckchair unaware of the situation. His feelings are utterly no guide to the true situation.

Here's a good lady in bed one dark night. Her husband is away on business. Presently, she is startled out of her sleep by an awful crashing and banging downstairs in the lounge. What has actually happened is that the poker had been standing a-slant on the tiles, but eventually by the law of gravity it slipped down and made an awful *boom*. She's upstairs and can't see what the true cause of the noise is. You know what happens, don't you? Vivid pictures begin to arise of masked burglars and guns and bandits, and I don't know what.

Feelings do not reflect the facts. How often that happens in the experience of our hearts and souls. People will say, 'Yes, I do believe the Lord Jesus, but I don't feel saved.' Now that's unfortunate. It is a beautiful thing when faith brings us into God's salvation and reflects itself in our feelings; but the feelings are not essential. There is no verse in the Bible that tells us how many feelings we've got to have before we may be saved. Very often, even those joyful feelings that sometimes we get are replaced temporarily by a stomach ache, or a toothache, or too much cheese eaten the night before, or a sudden bereavement or illness. Don't let us confuse feelings with faith.

Someone has likened it this way. Fact, Faith and Feelings were walking along the top of a brick wall. Fact went first, and so long as Faith kept its eyes glued in front on Fact, Feelings followed quite respectably behind. Presently, Faith looked round to see how Feelings was getting on, and took its eyes off Fact. Then Feelings became very wobbly and the more it tried to get on the right path, the more wobbly Feelings became. It is always so.

Faith centres itself on God's unchangeable facts and leaves feelings to take care of themselves. After all, in this matter of forgiveness, it is what God says that counts. Even though I feel as happy as the day is long, if God has not forgiven me, I am in danger of eternal

perdition. And even though I feel all confused inside, if God has forgiven me, the fact is that I am eternally saved.

Faith is not sight

Our passage that we read on this score reminded us that faith is not sight. When that nobleman came to the Lord Jesus and pleaded with him to come down before his child died, Jesus said to him, 'Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe' (John 4:48). The man would have preferred the Lord to come down to his house and do a miracle so that he could see the results, and then he was prepared to believe. That is useless. God wants us to believe before we see the results. How many folks are waiting until they see the results of God's Spirit working in their lives before they can be sure? They feel that this is being honest. They want to see genuine Christian work in their own lives, and until they see it they are not prepared to say they're Christians. Except they can see the wonder of Christ working in their souls they are not prepared to believe.

That's like wanting to get water out of your kitchen tap without first opening the stopcock on the road outside. You say, 'I'm not prepared to believe there is any water out there until I see it coming out of my tap.' But you'll have to go out to the road, turn on the mains and wait some minutes, like you used to do in some bathrooms, until the water comes up.

So this man was made to wait. In the nature of things, he would not see for some hours whether what Christ had said was true or not. Would he believe? Would he just take Christ's naked word, when he couldn't see or feel any result? All the authority he had to know whether the thing was true or not was that Christ had said it. What a challenge that was to the man's heart, when at home his boy was at the very gates of death with fever. Yet these are the terms.

God does not ask us to wait until we see the evidence of his workings in our hearts, he asks us to believe Christ and take his naked word for it.

Faith is not a sense of conviction

Conviction comes with growing knowledge and growing experience of God. Faith is the willingness to commit myself to a person, whatever happens.

Here's a man and he stands in his bedroom on the 74th floor of a skyscraper and his retreat has been cut off by fire. The fireman appears at the window and he says, 'Now, old fellow, come to me and I'll carry you down.' He comes to the window and has a look at that long distance down. He's scared stiff and he can scarcely move.

'Come on,' says the fireman, 'I want you to trust yourself to me and I'll take you down.'

The man says, 'I'm scared. I daren't.'

The fireman says, 'Never mind, just let yourself go in my arms. Relax and shut your eyes, and I'll do it all. I've taken hundreds of people down ladders like this and I've never lost one of them.'

The man says, 'I'd like to believe that, but I don't feel you can.'

'Look here, old fellow,' he says, 'if you don't make up your mind and come to your decision soon, the floor is going to drop out underneath you.'

Faced with that dreadful fear, the man says, 'Right, there's only one way out of this. I'll do it; I'll trust myself to this man. I'm sure I'll break my neck, but it's the only way, so I'll trust myself to him.'

The fireman gets hold of him. Every single step down the ladder the man is in fear of his life, but he gets to the bottom safely. He hasn't a lot of conviction, but he came to his decision and entrusted himself to his saviour.

In Mark 9 we read of another father, whose son had an unclean spirit. It was the man's first experience of Christ. Even though he was full of doubt and difficulty and fear, he made the decision in his heart to bring his will to bear upon the matter. 'I believe;' he said, 'help my unbelief!' (v. 24). There's a mighty great difference between him and an aged apostle with years of experience of God, saying, 'I am convinced' (2 Tim 1:12), but the one man was saved as much as the other. Believing in Christ is a matter of our will. 'I will trust him and commit to him all the difficulties, doubts, fears, and the worries.'

Faith is not by our trying

And so I end with a remark or two on how this faith comes. It doesn't come by our trying. 'So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ' (Rom 10:17). It's by listening to what he says and letting his word provoke the faith. In the last analysis it will depend on what we think of God and Christ. In fact, the Hebrew word for *believing* means, 'I believe in somebody when I consider them to be utterly reliable.'

Christ says to each one of us, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). Then it's a matter between myself and Christ, and what I think of him. I've got to decide if I think he's a liar: perhaps in some things he said the truth and in other things he was grossly astray? Would he say one thing today and another thing tomorrow? I've got to decide whether I really think that he meant every word he said and it's impossible for him to lie (see Heb 6:18). If I do, then I shall commit my all to him and enter into rest.

We see the tremendous importance of this. Knowing ourselves to be sinners and God's judgment is against sin, we face eternity and need to be saved. Soon we shall be beyond the place where it's possible to choose. We are confronted with the situation where we must decide whom we are going to choose, and whom we are going to believe. Am I going to believe myself, trust my feelings, and let them be the judge of the matter? I tell you, that is hell begun on earth. To go out into eternity trusting ourselves is to be one little speck of humanity locked within the prison house of itself forever. That's hell.

The Saviour who died on Calvary stands in front of us, imploring us to cast the anchor of our souls outside of ourselves, and he guarantees that if we place it in him it will never drift in this life or in the next.

Man's Relationship to God

The Christian Pathway

Our Lord Jesus Christ indicated that Christianity is both a gate and a road. It is a gate that one enters once and for all by a simple and speedily effected experience, but it is followed by a road that lasts for the whole of life. It is on the road ('the way' ESV, KJV, etc.) that I wish to concentrate this evening, whereas previously we have been thinking rather of the gateway. I would therefore like to point out from the start that it is important to see in which order those things come. Our Lord Jesus said:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matt 7:13–14)

In his exposition the gate comes first and then the road. Unfortunately, in many people's thinking, the order has been reversed. Their idea of salvation is that it is a long road with a gate at the far end, and we toil along the Christian pathway doing our best to behave like good Christians. The result is always uncertain whether we shall in fact qualify to enter the gate of heaven at the end after all. That idea is not only wrong, but exceedingly harmful.

How do we begin to have a relationship with God?

It is not the fact that we walk the Christian pathway in order to qualify to enter God's heaven and kingdom; it is altogether the reverse. True Christian experience starts with entering the gateway. To put it in our Lord's words, 'I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture' (John 10:9).

Without that initial experience of salvation, it is impossible to walk the Christian pathway. Unless I can honestly say that I know what it means to enter that door—I have entered it and I am saved—all my trying to walk it will prove to be not only fruitless but disastrous in the end. We cannot *live* as Christians until we have personally *become* Christians, and that is the point I should like to emphasize at the beginning of this talk. So let's read what the Apostle James has to say:

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But

someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (2:14–26)

From the Apostle Paul's writings, and from the words of our Lord Jesus, it is evident that a person is justified before God not by works, but by faith alone: 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 5:1). There may appear to be a contradiction here. James is making the point that faith apart from works is utterly dead, and a man is justified by works. This has been a very real difficulty to many people and they find James far easier to understand than Paul.

'This begins to make some sense,' they say. 'James is saying that we are justified by our works. We must work; to say we believe without doing Christian works, that's altogether idle. Does it not mean that we do our very best to please God in order to be saved?'

If you point out the words of Romans 4:5, 'And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,' they will very often frankly confess that it completely mystifies them. They understand James when he says that we're justified by works; it seems common sense. They find it very difficult to grasp, then, that this other part of the Bible should say it's to the one who does not work that God's salvation is given.

Of course, it is not a question of some isolated verse. Paul elsewhere positively says, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Eph 2:8–9). He records his own conversion in these terms, 'But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy' (Titus 3:4–5).

Faith and works

So then somebody will say, 'There must be a contradiction in the Bible after all. A good many chapters say that salvation is utterly by faith and not by works. How will you reconcile it with James when he says that we are justified by works?'

Let us notice that there is no contradiction, and that can easily be seen and proved. The Apostle James wrote his epistle before the Apostle Paul wrote his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, or perhaps any of his letters. But more than that, we read in the Acts of the Apostles that a doubt arose early on in the minds of Christians as to what Paul taught and what James taught. In consequence, Paul went up to Jerusalem along with Barnabas and met

James. At that conference they declared that James and Paul believed exactly the same thing, and wrote a letter to that effect, so the idea that they contradicted each other was permanently and forever knocked on the head (Acts 15:23–29).

How then can it be reconciled? The answer is very easy. Paul says that we are justified before God by faith because our works are altogether inadequate. We could not possibly earn salvation by them, so we come as bankrupt sinners, believe the Saviour and he gives us eternal life as a free gift. But because eternal life is a real thing, a real power, then it will show itself in the life of the person who receives it. If I say I am a real believer in our Lord Jesus Christ, I am claiming to have eternal life. If I do that, everybody has a right to look at me and see whether there is any evidence for my claim. When my works give practical evidence, it is justified and shown to be real and right.

If I claim to have eternal life, but my works belie my profession and are consistently unworthy of a Christian, you'd have every right to call into question the reality of my salvation. It is not only my fellow men and women, but the Bible informs us that God himself looks for evidence in the lives of those who profess to trust him.

Two examples

Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' — and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (Jas 2:21–26)

1. *'Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?'*

On that historic occasion it was not a question of Abraham proving to his friends that he was a genuine believer, for there weren't any friends there. He was alone on the mountaintop with Isaac, even the servants had been left behind. He was not proving his genuineness to his friends; he was demonstrating before God the reality of his faith by his act of obedience. The voice that came from heaven did not say, 'Now Sarah knows that you are a genuine believer,' nor, 'Now your friends will see that your profession of faith is real.' The voice came from God himself, '*. . . for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*' (Gen 22:12).

But somebody says, 'Surely God knew that before?' Perhaps he did. That does not diminish in the slightest the fact that God himself insists upon those of us who profess to be saved that in our lives there shall be works that provide evidence that we are genuine.

2. *'And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?'*

'Take Rahab, who let in the spies,' says James. She showed by her practical action towards those spies that her allegiance had been transferred from the wicked people of her city to the side of God and God's people. If the people in Jericho had known what Rahab had done, they

would not have felt like commending her. It would have enraged and infuriated them. They would probably have said, 'Do you call that being a good religious person?' It was not a question so much of proving the genuineness of her trust in God to them, but showing it to God himself.

When a man or woman gets converted and begins to break away from former evil habits and sins, it is a common thing that, instead of complimenting them, their former companions will criticize them most severely and dub them as narrow minded and all sorts of other things. They will object most furiously, but what they say is for the moment beside the point; we must show God that we are genuine. In a moment I'll come to how we may show him, and what kind of works he is looking for in those who trust him.

But, while we are considering this matter of evidence, there is one exceedingly important thing we ought to notice. I say this, lest somebody who is a genuine Christian should go away and start to look at his or her life, and say, 'I've not been too good; I wonder if I'm a Christian at all.'

Evidence and proof are different things

That could be exceedingly dangerous and I have no intention of unsettling people's faith. Try to follow while I make what may seem to be a difficult distinction. When we think of our lives, we must always remember that evidence is one thing, proof is quite another. You can have conflicting evidence, but you can never have conflicting proof. There ought to be plenty of *evidence* in my works that I am saved, but *proof* is another thing altogether. We're not talking about proof; we are talking about evidence.

Let me adopt what may appear to be a crude illustration. Here is a beautiful car, the engine is perfect. As everybody knows, there are two ways of propelling a car along the road. The first is the way we normally use: we fill the tank with petrol, set the engine going and it pushes the car along the road. The other way is the discomfoting method we are forced to adopt sometimes. When the petrol runs out we have to get behind the car and push it. The distinction is exceedingly important.

How do we find out whether the car has the vital stuff that makes it go? We know right away that the real secret is that there should be petrol in the tank, but we can't see whether it's full or empty without taking the engine to bits. The garage man says that he put the petrol in; how do we find out if his claim is genuine?

Somebody says, 'We'll turn the key and look at the gauge.'

You turn the key and the gauge shows that it's full. But then you can't trust all gauges; they go wrong sometimes. How shall we justify the profession that the gauge makes? It says that the tank is full, but is the claim right?

'I shan't believe it until I see the car move along the road,' you say.

That's very good and sensible. You want evidence that there's petrol in the tank and the only evidence that's likely to satisfy you for the moment is that the car moves along the road.

The only way we can possibly lead a Christian life is by God giving us his Spirit, his eternal life within us. We cannot buy eternal life by our works, we must have it as a gift. I claim to

have the gift, but you won't be satisfied with my words as a gauge, will you? You'll say, 'All right, you claim to have eternal life; show me your eternal life by your works.'

But come back to the illustration of the car. Sometimes you're going along the road when suddenly the engine peters out and it comes to a dead stop. Nothing you do will make it start. You say, 'I didn't know we had run out of petrol,' but when you look at the gauge it says that the tank is at least half-full.

Somebody comes along and says, 'I don't believe there is any petrol in it.'

But you say, 'I know there is, because I was there when it was filled up.'

'Well,' he says, 'it doesn't go.'

The fact that the car doesn't go for the moment is not proof that it hasn't got any petrol. The petrol is there, but some dirt may have got into the carburettor, or the plugs may not be clean, and for the moment it's stopping the petrol doing its work.

My illustration is aimed to show that it is very possible for a man or woman to believe the Saviour, receive his Holy Spirit, have eternal life, and for that life to become temporarily choked. They may be 'sowing to the flesh' (see Gal 6:8), and their actions for the time being seem to contradict the claim that they have God's salvation. That is frequently the case for many of us who profess Christianity. Though we have eternal life and are born again, and we shall never perish, our channels get clogged and the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work within us is not apparent.

It is most unfortunate when that happens with a genuine believer, but it doesn't prove that they have never been saved and never had eternal life, does it? The Bible talks like this. It is possible for a person who has the Holy Spirit to be overtaken in a fault, and to fall (Gal 6:1). But if a person's normal behaviour is to continually live in sin and to constantly practise sin, if his usual attitude to his brother is one of hatred (1 John 3:15), then that person is not from God, he does not have eternal life. Do you see the difference between the two?

There's a third thing we ought to notice. We watch a car doing fifty downhill; it's going well. Then it gets on to the flat and begins to pull up; when it meets an incline it comes to a dead stop. The plugs are clean, the carburettor clear, what's wrong with the thing? Well, it just hasn't got any petrol. So, what do you do about that?

'Oh,' says somebody, 'we'll get out and push it until it gets some petrol.'

But it will never get petrol by pushing, you know. If you're strong enough you could push it along the road at fifty miles an hour, but that won't put any petrol inside. Alas, there are many people who are pushing desperately through life to do Christian things, to live like Christians ought to live, but they've no 'petrol' inside. They've never received eternal life, and they feel that if they work hard and really endeavour to be a Christian, that's how they'll get God's salvation. If I may mix the metaphor, they have 'put the cart before the horse'.

No, if you want to get petrol, you don't get it by getting out of the car, pushing hard and trying to make the car go; you go along to the supplier. But I'm afraid he won't just give it to you, you'll have to buy it.

The parable of the ten virgins

My illustration is not so crude as you might think. Change car to lamp, petrol to oil, motorist to virgin, and we have precisely a parable that our Lord himself gave.

Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them, but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'Since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.' And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterwards the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, lord, open to us.' But he answered, 'Truly, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. (Matt 25:1-13)

All ten had heard the fact that the bridegroom was coming. Outwardly all were alike: all had lamps, all were virgins, all were waiting for the bridegroom to come, all became drowsy and slept—yes, all of them. They shouldn't have. The Bible exhorts Christians in these terms, 'So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober' (1 Thess 5:6).

'The coming of the Lord is at hand' (Jas 5:8). Judgment is coming on this wicked world and coming very fast, so don't let us go to sleep. We ought to be awake, and one of the evidences that we are genuine Christians is the fact that we are awake to the Lord's coming. How can I call myself a Christian, if I know that the Lord is coming and I believe that this age is soon to experience God's judgment, and my fellow men and women will perish eternally if they are not saved and born again, if I never utter a word to my friends of their need to get saved? It seems to make a nonsense of my whole profession, doesn't it?

They ought not to have slumbered and slept. If you had come across those virgins, all sleeping, you'd have said to yourself, 'I wonder if they are really expecting the bridegroom to come. Are they genuinely interested?' Eventually at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' They all woke up and then the truth came out. Five of them not only had oil in their lamps, they had oil in their large pitchers. They had been joined, so to speak, to the greater supply. Waking up out of their temporary carelessness and sleep, they made themselves ready and went in with the bridegroom to the marriage feast.

The others woke up, but found that they had no big supply. What little oil they had was running out. 'Our lamps are going out,' they said. Eventually they spluttered out completely and while they went off to buy the oil the bridegroom came and they were left outside.

It does not excuse Christian inconsistency, but if it was announced that our Lord would be here ten hours from now, some of us Christians would wake up with a tremendous start. My, how furiously we'd work in the places where we live, telling folk that we'd never told before about God's salvation. We'd waken up, and because we are genuine believers and have God's Holy Spirit we should find adequate resources for our responsibility.

But if it were announced that our Lord would be here ten hours from now and we all woke up, I wonder would some of us find that we haven't got the real thing. We've all got some oil: all of us maybe know some little text of Scripture and we have sometimes stood in our churches and sung hymns. We've got a little light, but that's not enough. It's not enough to know pieces out of the Bible or to sing nice hymns, lovely as those things are. The only thing that will suffice for time and for the world beyond is the possession of God's infinite Holy Spirit, the personal possession of eternal life. All the 'pushing' in the world and trying to be a Christian will never put that oil inside us. We must come to the Lord and 'buy' it for ourselves. In the Bible's words, 'Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price' (Isa 55:1).

You see, salvation is a free gift. How important it is to receive that free gift of God's eternal life, his Holy Spirit, and to know that we are saved before we go about trying to lead a Christian life. If we have God's salvation and the Holy Spirit—light enough for ourselves and for our whole city, if need be—then how important it is that we get about our business and tell the world that Christ is coming, that it is possible to go in with him, but those who are not prepared will be left outside forever. It is important to remember these two distinctions.

Christians can sometimes be criticized by people of the world. Here's a poor old woman and she was brought up in an ungodly, cruel home. Her father was a drunkard; her mother was careless. She grew up maimed in her personality from a child, saddled maybe with an inferiority complex that makes her difficult to live and work with. In all her awkwardness, she comes to the Saviour and receives the gift of eternal life. The Lord receives her just as she is, and she becomes one of God's children. The Lord begins his reconstruction in her life, but it's a work that will take years. She has God's Holy Spirit and she's eternally secure, for God loves her and has forgiven her for Christ's sake. But often her difficult temperament clogs the channels and there isn't always the full evidence of the Holy Spirit within her.

'There you are,' says the world. 'Look at her sharp tongue and her quick temper. How does she call herself a Christian?'

If she has God's Holy Spirit, certainly she is a genuine Christian. Before God has finished with her he'll make her perfect and 'present [her] blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy' (Jude v. 24).

Here's another man who was brought up in a very comfortable home. He has a good physique and an easy temperament, a kindly chap, 'hail-fellow-well-met'. It's easy for him to be suave and courteous; his back doesn't bend over a washtub, he isn't constantly pushed for money, and he thinks he's a decent chap. But God says he is a broken sinner, and if he does not become regenerate, receive God's Holy Spirit and be born again in time, eternity will tell. Good as he is, he's not good enough for God. Proceeding on his own steam without God's salvation, he will perish and his personality disintegrate for eternity.¹⁰

¹⁰ This does not mean annihilation. See [Appendix](#).

What does God require of Christians?

What does God require of Christians—people who do have his Holy Spirit, who are saved and have eternal life—those who say they are walking this Christian pathway? I do not propose to list in detail all those many social, church, family, or business duties that we have, nor have I any need to do so. They are plainly written in holy Scripture for us all to see. Our Lord Jesus said that the basic principle was: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments’ (John 14:15).

Let me mention, however, the two commandments that our Lord specifically left for his followers. There are only two Christian ordinances, and our Lord personally commanded them both:

1. to be baptized publicly in his name;
2. to remember him by eating the Lord’s Supper.

These things are not left as a matter of our choice. If you had been one of Peter’s converts, he would have done with you what he did with Cornelius. When Cornelius believed and received the Holy Spirit and there was evidence that his profession of faith was genuine, we read that Peter *commanded* him to be baptized (Acts 10:48).

Our Lord ordained that, at the very threshold of our profession of faith in the Lord Jesus, we publicly give evidence that we have accepted his Lordship without any reserve by being baptized in his name. Ours is not to reason why, or to reply, ‘What good is it?’ or to offer the observation, ‘But I don’t think it’s necessary.’ That is to miss its immediate point.

We profess to receive Jesus as Lord. ‘Very good,’ says God. ‘Now justify your profession by your works.’ It wouldn’t matter if baptism were of no earthly use whatever; it stands as a test of our profession. If we say, ‘Yes, I receive Jesus as Lord,’ and then, when we see the Lord’s command to be baptized, we say, ‘I don’t see the point or any need of it,’ that contradicts the profession we have just made. If we love him, we keep his commandments—the ones we understand, and the ones we don’t yet understand. Isn’t that true?

Just before he went out to face Calvary, he asked us to gather publicly and remember him in the Lord’s Supper (see Luke 22:14–20). If we love him, we keep his commandments. It’s idle to say that we love him, and not keep his commandments.

The development of Christian character

Christianity is not merely keeping ordinances, valuable as they are. Christians need to give heed to the exhortation of the Apostle Peter.

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet 1:5–8)

Being saved and having eternal life, we now seriously, deliberately and joyfully cooperate with God. By the aid of God's power and his promises, we build Christian ways and virtues into our character. You see, it's one thing to be born a wee babe in God's family; it's another thing to grow to a maturely developed Christian personality. It is open to us to choose to remain babes and say, 'I'm eternally secure; why should I bother any more?' Or we can do as we are asked and cooperate with God in the deliberate building-up of a Christian character.

Does it matter? 'It matters eternally,' says Peter. 'For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ' (v. 11). Let us cooperate with God, lay hold of his power and his promises, and by his grace develop our characters. Then, when it comes to his eternal kingdom, an abundant entrance shall be richly provided for us. If we neglect that task and remain Christian babies, we shall still get in—just in; and as far as I read it, the difference is eternal.

How to make friends for eternity

We are fond of comforting the sinner who repents with the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15), and how right we are to do so. The man who went out and in folly wasted his money, time, talents and strength; wasted the lot in reckless living. He repented and came to his father, and his father received him with open arms. The past was forgotten. The father re-equipped him with robe and ring and shoes, and our Lord holds up the example to show us how God receives the sinner who returns. God's grace welcomes him back and makes him a child in the Father's family.

We should not forget that there is another parable following that one (16:1–13). The first parable teaches us that, however we have squandered our substance, there is salvation and eternal life for us if we come to the Saviour. The next parable reminds us that if, as Christians, we squander our lives, our money, our time, our talents, we shall suffer loss eternally. 'Give your time and talents,' says our Lord, 'so that when you have to leave earth's goods behind, you have friends who will "receive you into the eternal dwellings"' (v. 9).

I sometimes think that we are not realistic enough about eternity. By being saved on earth, it doesn't mean that every Christian is equally our intimate friend. There is no reason to think it will be so in heaven. If I have lived for God and God's glory and my fellows' good, and if I've spent my time and energy in bringing God's salvation to my fellow men and women, when I get home at last I shall not only be eternally saved, but there will be a bond of friendship between me and those who were saved by my work and prayers; a bond of friendship that will be close and eternal. But if I have taken that same time, energy, money and talents, and spent them on legitimate things, but just selfishly for myself, I shall still be saved—but I don't know that everybody will feel especially friendly towards me. Eternity could be somewhat of a lonely thing. Our Lord urged upon Christians the necessity to use their time and talents for eternal advantage.

Building on the foundation

The Apostle Paul says that it is not merely a matter of building to yourself Christian character, but of building up that great church, that great temple for God that consists of redeemed men and women.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Cor 3:10–15).

Talking to his fellow Christians at Corinth, he said, 'I have laid the foundation, which is Jesus Christ. You don't need to lay the foundation again, but go and build on it. If your work is of good quality, your wealth will abound eternally and you will receive a reward. But if you build shoddy stuff, it will be burned up.' The believer who did the work shall be saved, but he himself shall suffer loss. Perhaps a lifetime's work shall go? 'He himself will be saved, but only as through fire' (v. 15). Christian responsibility and opportunity is an exceedingly real thing.

'Oh,' says somebody, 'I don't believe in working for reward. I think we should work for the love of it.'

Well go on and work for the love of it then! But it has pleased God to say that there is reward for Christian work.

'What kind of reward?' you ask.

Well, judging from our Lord's parables, at the judgment seat of Christ a person who used the little gift he had in service for the Lord here shall get the reward, not of a gracious and dignified retirement, but the opportunity to do ten times more work up there. In heaven they count the opportunity to work one of their greatest privileges. I don't know how enjoyable it would be to walk around on golden streets unemployed.

Somebody says, 'That's all right for you to talk, because apparently you are a Christian lecturer and preacher, but we can't all preach and lecture. Some of us have got to run the shop and cut up the meat.'

Of course you do, but let none of us feel any conflict here. Whether our work is tending the shop, making the beds, or expounding the Bible, it is the motive that counts. If the motive is right, much of the apparent conflict of duty will disappear. 'But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you' (Matt 6:33). Make that your object in all you do, rather than the getting of your bread and butter. In the peeling of the potatoes and the keeping of the ledger and the making of money, let the prime motive be, 'I'm in God's business and I'm doing this for him.' All the rest shall be added and there will be no conflict of duty. It is as holy a thing to plough one's field, if it is ploughed primarily for God, as it is to preach to sinners. Of course it is, and it will obtain a right reward.

We can't be on the road until we have entered the gate

Now I come back to the point I made at the beginning, and with this I close this lecture and this series of lectures. I have concentrated on the Christian pathway, and I trust these few observations have been helpful to you, even as they have added to my own personal responsibility.

But for any who have followed these lectures who are not yet committed Christians, I have just one fear. In the previous lecture I emphasized the need to begin by coming to the Saviour, being born again and receiving eternal life. I stressed heavily that, if we would be saved and have a proper relationship with God, we must come through this experience that the Saviour describes, 'I am the door. *If anyone enters by me, he will be saved*' (John 10:9). Your reaction perhaps has been a whole array of different emotions. You can see that what I have been saying is founded on holy Writ: that a man must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom of God. You have wondered and wondered and thought and thought. You've stood outside the door wondering.

In this lecture I've gone on to speak of the Christian pathway, and perhaps I have diverted your attention and raised all sorts of other issues in your mind that strictly belong to people who are already Christians. I am just afraid that I may have diverted your attention from what for you is the first, and in fact the only important point at this juncture. If any of us are not yet inside the gate, not yet born again, or if in anybody's mind there lingers a doubt about personal salvation, I would ask you to forget this lecture. There's no need to worry about the road, until we have settled this business about entering the gate.

You say, 'I find it so difficult. There are so many viewpoints.'

So there are, of course. But it is not as difficult as you make out. Conflicting though your emotions and thoughts may be, in the end it is settled by the decision of your will. Christ says he is the door; he urges you to come to him and enter in. Outside you'll perish, inside you are saved. He will deal with all those perplexities that may surround you, but you must come in first and discuss the problems with him on the inside. I warrant you, they'll look a lot different from the inside. It is a matter of the will. Whether it all seems abundantly clear to you, or whether at the moment a number of things confuse you, in his name I insist once more that this is your decision.

It's as simple as this. The Lord Jesus says, 'Come to me, enter in and be saved.' You either decide that you will, or you decide that you won't. Putting it off, wanting to get it clear to the very last question and the last difficulty, is often but a smear by which the enemy of our souls diverts our attention from the real issue. It is not feeling, it is not emotion, it is the decision of our will, as we listen to the Saviour – will we come, or won't we?

Said our Lord, being deadly earnest, 'Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able' (Luke 13:24). Of some, our Lord had regrettably to lament, 'yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life' (John 5:40). Until it is your will to come, he can do nothing to give you practical salvation.

God grant that these lectures shall lead to that end. May all of us enter in and then be helped of God to walk that narrow road that ends in glory.

APPENDIX

Why I Do Not Accept the Theory of Annihilation

If you ask me to choose three reasons for not accepting the theory of annihilation, I would choose the following:

1. The word for punishment in Matthew 25:46 is *kolasis*. The formation of the word—that is, its ending ‘sis’—shows that it is an active noun meaning the process of punishing and not simply punishment. Compare the Greek word *praxis*, which means ‘a making’, with *pragma*, which means ‘a thing made’. ‘Eternal punishment’ might be consistent with annihilation, but ‘eternal punishing’ cannot be held to describe annihilation. Advocates of annihilation sometimes express themselves as believing in eternal punishment, but not in eternal punishing. But as I understand it *kolasis* means punishing. That is why Bauer’s Lexicon lists examples from secular Greek, in which *kolasis* means ‘torture’. One of its citations is very much to the point *hē epimonos kolasis*, meaning long-continued torture.

2. Revelation 14:10–11 warns that the one who takes the mark of the beast will be ‘tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever’. It might be possible to argue that this smoke going up for ever and ever is like the smoke of Sodom and Gomorrah, indicating that the city and all its inhabitants have been annihilated. But the argument is not sound; for verse 11 goes on to say that ‘they have no rest, day or night’, and this phrase must refer to the experience of those who are undergoing this torment. John Stott argues that one cannot deduce the eternal torment of individual people from the phrase in Revelation 19:20, which declares that ‘the beast . . . and . . . the false prophet . . . [will be] thrown alive into the lake of fire’, where ‘they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (20:10), because, according to John Stott, the beast and the false prophet are not individuals but institutions. But Revelation 14:9–11 explicitly speaks of individuals: ‘if anyone worships the beast . . .’.¹¹

3. Philosophically and theologically I cannot see that the case for annihilation (or at least John Stott’s version of it) is either just or merciful. He agrees that the impenitent will be judged according to their works; and that must mean there will be degrees of punishment. Indeed, our Lord informed us that it will be more tolerable for the men of Sodom and Gomorrah than for those of Capernaum (Matt 11:24). To hold that the impenitent who appear before the great white throne will be immediately annihilated, means that all sinners, whatever the degree of their sinning, will suffer the same punishment. Indeed, instantaneous annihilation is scarcely a punishment at all; and therefore people like John Stott have to admit that the impenitent will not be instantaneously annihilated, but first punished and then annihilated. But in most

¹¹ See: David L. Edwards and John Stott: *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, pp. 312-329, Hodder & Stoughton Religious; First Edition (1 April 1988).

civilized countries, a man who is to be executed for murder is not first tortured and then executed—that would be regarded as a very savage thing. If the man is to pay the supreme penalty, then he is not submitted to any preliminary torture before being executed. On John Stott's theory then, the impenitent will first be punished for a finite period and then annihilated. That suggests to me that he imagines that, by this finite period of punishment, they pay the penalty for their sins; and when the penalty is exhausted they are then annihilated.

That, to my mind, raises two very big questions: Is it possible for a human being to exhaust the penalty of his sins in a finite period of time? And if it is, why is that human being not set free upon the completion of the penalty? In English law the criminal who has suffered the penalty for his crime is regarded as being thereby justified. I assume that John Stott's reply to this would be that the finite period of punishment is on account of the man's individual sins. But when he has paid that penalty he is annihilated because he is still unrepentant towards God and refuses to believe in the Saviour. Annihilation, therefore, is the punishment for the one sin of rejecting the Saviour—not so much for rejecting his sacrifice, because, having suffered for his own sins and being thereby justified, the man needs no sacrifice. He is annihilated simply for his wrong attitude of heart towards the divine persons. If that is so, then—excuse my apparent *antinomianism*—free will is not what it appears to be. God turns out after all to be like Mr. Henry Ford, who told his customers that they could have any colour of car they wished, so long as it was black!

A God who gives his creatures irretrievable free will, and even when they persist in using it to reject him still honours the gift he has given them, is to my mind far greater than a God who gives his creatures free will only as long as they do not use that free will to decide against him.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.